# Dedication Address

BY

Edgar A. Bancroft

NOT IN M.

To
George R. Peck

With affectionate greetings
and good will, from
Edgar A. Bancroft

21 December 1896.

# THE MORAL SENTIMENT OF THE PEOPLE, THE INDEX AND FOUNDATION OF NATIONAL GREATNESS.

An Address by

EDGAR A. BANCROFT

On the Occasion of

THE DEDICATION OF THE SOLDIERS' MEMORIAL HALL OF KNOX COUNTY, ILL.

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DEDICATED

BY THE

CADMUS CLUB

TO THE

SOLDIERS & SAILORS

OF THE CIVIL WAR

IN WHOSE

HONOR AND MEMORY

THIS ADDRESS

WAS GIVEN

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R. CHAIRMAN, VETERANS OF THE WAR FOR THE UNION AND FRIENDS:

In coming home to have a part in the dedication of a room which shall keep alive the best memories of the war — standing within sight of these clustering churches and almost within the shadow of this beloved college — it seems fitting to recall to your minds the animating spirit of the Union army, rather than its glorious deeds, or its splendid triumph. In doing this, I but bring you a lesson learned within these sacred influences: giving, if I may, some added emphasis to the idea which this City in its development has exalted, and which, I think, shines on every page of our national history worthy of our pride.

In inviting you to consider with me THE MORAL SENTIMENT OF THE PEOPLE, THE INDEX AND FOUNDATION OF NATIONAL GREATNESS, with especial reference to the Rebellion, I cannot but regret that

the message and the messenger are so little worthy of the theme and the occasion.

If it is still too soon to anticipate the estimate of posterity upon the issues of that war, and upon the characters of its actors, we may at least view the conflict with some perspective, and forecast with some confidence the judgment of the future. Whether we believe in divine interposition and in the unconquerable strength of the right, or not, we cannot doubt that the success of the Union cause was due to the moral sentiment that supported and inspired it. Against it were arrayed the strong passions, the local pride, the social traditions and the paramount industrial institution of a great and prosperous section. Aiding these were the division in Northern opinion upon the constitutional power of the Nation to coerce a State, the natural fraternal feeling between the sections, and the commercial interests of the North that would suffer from civil war. No power of reasoning or authority, no appeals to prejudice or partisan passion, no love of conquest, no martial ardor,—not one nor all of these, could have prevented

disunion. Only a higher sentiment than local pride, only a purer affection than fraternal feeling, only a loftier ambition than personal or sectional aggrandizement, could meet the need of that hour. Out of the calm wisdom and the pure purpose of Abraham Lincoln's mind and heart came, like a divine revelation, the one sentiment and the one thought that could overmaster all others. It was the sentiment of patriotism, the thought of the imperilled country, the love of the Nation,—a nation founded in blood by their fathers, the protector of their liberties—liberties which the poor slave did not share,—that made the Union arms invincible. They were not resisting disunion to protect their homes; selfish interest said to the South, "Erring Sister, go in peace." It was not for their liberties they were fighting; disunion would not have affected them. But there was a higher motive: that sublime forgetfulness of personal interest, the postponement of private gains for great public ends, the risking of life and fortune in a protest against the enslavement of another race dwelling under the same

constitution. This gave to the Northern cause that fine touch of chivalry which almost brought back the spirit and dash of the Crusades, and to the Union army a temper and a steadiness that the Crusades never knew.

In its physical aspects, the struggle had all the features of skillful strategy, unfaltering and persistent courage, that characterize great wars. But, considered in the light of its higher purposes and results, these features have a new interest and a deeper significance. On both sides were marshalled all the elements of military power and heroic endeavor. If the Union forces had the higher inspiration, — were led by the ideal of a nation, one and indivisible, and fought for universal freedom, — they who wore the gray, though they fought for disunion and slavery, gave an added glory to our victories by making them so hard to win. They, too, loved their homes; and they gave to the Sunny South a patriot's devotion. They, too, pledged their lives like heroes; and they almost redeemed the weakness of their cause with the valor and prowess of their arms.

The attack on Fort Sumter touched the moral sense of the North, and fired their hearts with patriotic love. How enthusiastic the response to the Nation's call for defenders! With no military experience, with no desire to share in the spoils of conquest or wear the laurels of war, the farmer left his plow in the clearing, the merchant his store, the mechanic his bench and forge, the student his books, the professional man his honors,—all equally careless of their personal fortunes,—that they might be enrolled as comrades in the cause that was greater than they—greater than all.

Of the sublimer heroism of the wives who gave their husbands, of the mothers who gave their sons, what tongue can fitly tell. Braver than Spartan mothers, tenderer than Roman maidens, they prized the honor of husbands, sons and lovers, and the safety of their common country, higher than their lives. With broken hearts and streaming eyes, how many women showed the spirit of the mother of Coriolanus when she said to his weeping wife: "Had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike and none less

dear than thine and my good Marcius, I had rather have eleven die for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action."

How patiently the raw recruits bore the hardships of their new life. How thoughts of home and native land brightened and warmed their camps when the days were dark and the nights were cold. With what courage and brave confidence they marched against the foe. Not only in the first attack, but, as the Count of Paris has pointed out in their praise, these mere militiamen, repulsed and ordered again to advance, would make the second and third assault with increased power and increased steadiness. Though not accustomed to obey orders without knowing their reason, these men through their devotion to the cause displayed this rarest quality of the veteran. With what good humor and cheerfulness they met all disasters and distresses. Not a page in the story, no matter how bloody, but is brightened by generous deeds, thoughtlessness of self and even merry hopefulness.

They were all heroes, because they

staked all they had and were for the cause they loved. They showed that absolute self-dependence and self-subsistency which, Emerson says, are so attractive in the classic hero. Marching through snow and ice, sleeping upon the ground without tents or fire, scantily fed and clothed, these men were ready at Donelson to fight all day indecisively, and to repeat the charge on the morrow as gaily and bravely as though they were well rested, well fed and well clothed.

In the Wilderness they lay in the trenches night after night without a murmur, until the days became weeks, and the weeks were stretching into months. They knew the agony of wounds upon the field, and of waiting in weakness and uncertainty upon the hospital cot. They knew the diseases that their hardships brought; and, worse than marching, worse than fighting, worse than wounds and diseases and death, they knew the living death of the noisome prison pens. There no bugle note awakened ardor, no excitement of danger made them forget the pain, no letters from home, or soft voices and kindly presence of hospital nurses,

raised sinking hopes. Shelterless, ill-fed, in the midst of the dead and dying, they daily led a forlorn hope against grim despair. And when they escaped the prison, or were recovered of their diseases or wounds, they turned again with new zeal to give themselves for the Nation's defense. By thousands and hundreds of thousands they paid "the last full measure of devotion,"—broke life's precious box of ointment at their country's feet. They did it willingly, gladly, and regretted, like Nathan Hale, that they had but one life to give to their country.

But we are not met to glorify the deeds of our heroes, or to dedicate a hall to preserve the memory of them. Their valor speaks from the grave with an eloquence that no tongue can match. Their fame is spoken by myriad flags that fly on every sea and over this broad land. Their heroism the world knew then and remembers now. The Nation they saved is their guerdon and their monument. But the spirit which animated them,—their lofty patriotism,—we are little worthy of, if we ever forget. To that this day is sacred.

When the South surrendered, Europe foretold that these greatest armies of modern times could not be disbanded at once without resistance and disorder. And even among us it was gravely suggested that we should provoke a war with Mexico in order to find a safe and gradual return to a state of peace. As well might Rome have expected Brutus to seek pretense for slaying other children because from stern sense of duty, in vindication of the law, he had taken the life of his son! But they little appreciated with what shrinking and repugnance the war had been carried on, and how gladly all participants, from the general to the private, returned to the arts of peace.

Soldiers of fortune and students of war should read the annals of the Rebellion for its lessons in strategy, its proofs of military genius, its illustrations of the maxims of war. Poets and painters and lovers of the heroic may wisely search its pages for examples of high daring, unflinching devotion, and tender self-sacrifice. But the highest lesson of the war is not in these. Its supreme significance lies in the fact that it was waged on

a lofty moral plane,—that it was a conflict of conscience,—and that the forces of the Union fought under the inspiration of the highest moral sentiment.

More essentially than any other in history, the war for the Union was a war for principle. Its supporters were thrilled by a sentiment that amounted almost to religious fervor. How universal this feeling was, was shown by the spirit and the popularity of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and of that even more famous song of " ohn Brown's Body." Every brave act by a Northern soldier had added to its physical courage the transfiguring touch of moral heroism. It was the soul of John Brown that led them forward. It was the pathetic figure on Calvary that gave sacredness to all their suffering and endurance. The song,

"As He died to make men holy,
Let us die to make men free,"

echoed and re-echoed, thrilling the hearts by the fireside, and cheering the soldiers on the field like the sign of the cross on the cloud to Constantine.

It was this widespread sentiment which gave the incursion and execution

of John Brown its strange place in Northern opinion. To foreign observers and to modern critics he seems to have been but a wild fanatic who madly and vainly braved the laws that sheltered injustice. To them, Wendell Phillips spoke in strange exaggeration when he said of Brown's execution that the purest soul of the nineteenth century went up to God from a Virginia scaffold. But the quickened hearts of patriots understood what that meant.

This ardent patriotic sentiment was not a sudden growth, nor was its extent accidental. It was fostered by many events and influences between the birth of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 and that day in April, 1861, when Fort Sumter was fired upon. The murder of Lovejoy in 1837, the Wilmot Proviso discussion in 1846, the appearance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1852, the Lecompton Constitution and the Dred Scott decision in 1857, and John Brown's execution in 1859, awakened and educated the Northern conscience.

A nation is like an individual. It has a moral character, which is at once

the basis and the touchstone of its power. It must be great in character before it can be noble in deeds. And this character is a growth, slow, hidden, constant. So it is that no emergency can make great characters: it can only reveal them. It is often said that the war produced great men. Not so. It furnished a field upon which men of high character could disclose themselves in heroic action. The man must ever precede the hero; integrity precede honor; and unselfishness precede self-sacrifice. Emerson said, the way to have great occasional thoughts is to have high thoughts habitually. While the American Colonization Society and other organizations, dealing in palliatives for the national disease and anaesthetics for uneasy consciences, were sending slaves and missionaries to Africa and Bible texts to the abolitionists, every fleeing negro, tracked by blood-hounds or by slave-catchers more brutal, was an apostle to the sleeping hearts of complacent Northerners. Many a man who had condemned the abolitionists found it impossible to deny shelter to the escaping bondman who had no friend but the

darkness of night, and no guide but the beckoning stars of the northern sky.

Garrison, Phillips, the Beechers, Gerritt Smith and Mrs. Stowe, and thousands as faithful though less famous, lifted the thoughts of our people above their selfish strivings and ambitions, and prepared the way for the great Emancipator. In this county we can boast such brave, inspiring souls as George W. Gale, Jonathan Blanchard and Edward Beecher. These and such as they rightly valued this brief human life; knew that wrong can never profit, and that justice is the supreme duty of man and of the state. And they turned the hearts of the people to justice and to weigh public men and measures in the scales of conscience. But greater than their words was the underground railroad. It did more for the whites than for the blacks: it gave enlarged moral life and freedom to the one, and release from physical bondage to the other. Every station on that line was a center of humanizing moral sense: a disseminator of vital truth.

It was not the slave-block in New Orleans, however, that made Lincoln the

foe of slavery. It was his essential honesty of mind and his inherent love of justice. At every stage in his political career he sought the truth; proclaimed it as he saw it; and believed in its sufficiency for all needs. As he never attempted to hide the humbleness of his origin or the facts of his early life, neither did he disguise or withhold his opinions —the facts of his political life. His political sagacity consisted in his veracity of nature and conduct, his fine and strong moral sense and moral courage. He was true to his best impulses and convictions. He never feared a lie, nor trusted in one. He never feared the truth, nor trusted in aught else. He never sacrificed the larger ends and opportunities of the future to gain the nearer present advantage. From the day that he said good-bye to his friends and neighbors at Springfield in 1861, until he spoke to the crowd standing beneath the windows of the White House a few evenings before his tragic death, Lincoln's mind and heart were set on the preservation of the Union, not as a political organization, but as a fatherland beloved of every human being with-

in its borders. He meant to preserve it, not by mere force of arms and against the impending danger, but by the stronger forces of a people's love—by a universal patriotism—sufficient not only then but for all time. That was his statesmanship—and it was supreme. To make each device a part of a great and overarching plan; to use for the hidden place, as for the most obtrusive, the best possible materials and the best possible skill,—this is architecture; this is statecraft; this is greatness.

The thought of the higher purpose of the war dominated every act of Lincoln's administration, kept him and his subordinates in civil and military life regardful of the constitution and of the national laws, even in the life-and-death struggle against their open enemies. He so reverenced the laws that he was loth to disregard them even to protect them. He knew that they had grown out of the experience and the conscience of generations of wise and just men. This delayed the Emancipation Proclamation when his political partisans and his abolitionist supporters were clamoring for immediate ac-

tion; and it prompted the noble sentiments of charity which breathed through all his references to the rebellious States.

It was their sense of this dominant spirit of Lincoln and his "boys in blue" that led Grant and Sherman to show an almost tender regard for the feelings of Lee and Johnston and their conquered hosts, in naming the terms of their surrender. It was more than magnanimity. They felt that they were the representatives not only of the physical forces of the nation, but of those finer and higher moral forces that had made the Army of the Union invincible.

And so, in a like spirit, this splendid Grand Army of the Republic was organized to bind up the wounds of the war, to care for the widow and orphan, and to exhibit in the selfish contests of a people eager for commercial greatness that generous comradeship that softened the rigors of battle.

They have obtained this Memorial Hall to preserve, as in a holy urn, not the ashes nor the deeds, but the spirit of the patriots of 1861-5. They know, as we cannot, the passionate love of country

that burned in these heroic breasts; and we know, if they did not, that it is this spirit of unselfishness, which ennobled their lives, that alone can preserve their memories. The moral quality alone persists. I do not mean morality of feeling or of conduct. I mean that purity and integrity of character—that sincerity and genuineness—that sense of honor and passion for the right, which are the quality of moral strength and superiority.

That was Lincoln's greatness. It held in check his temperament, which displayed widest extremes of lightness and gloom, of gay humor and dark melancholy; it kept his qualities in just equipoise; and gave to his judgment that higher wisdom which is neither inspiration nor insight, but is vision unclouded by self. By it his life is embalmed in sweetness and beauty for the glory of our nation and for the encouragement and guidance of future generations. For lack of it, Webster, with all his intellectual greatness, Seward with all his political skill, are in the comparison, but vanishing figures. With it, John Quincy Adams and Charles Sumner, Garrison,

Phillips and General Grant "beacon to the abode where the immortals are."

There were greater philosophers than Socrates, greater emperors than Marcus Aurelius; but their names are more secure, their influence more persistent, than those of all other philosophers and emperors of Greece and Rome. There have been greater intellects, broader culture, and an ampler political equipment than Lincoln possessed; but by virtue of the moral sentiment with which his character was saturated, he is the greatest, the most influential and the most beneficent of all our public men. He was a leader who led; and he respected himself and his followers too much to surrender his convictions to the opinion of the majority. It never occurred to him that to "keep close to the people" meant to become their obsequious flatterer; or that skillful equivocation was a full substitute for moral courage.

We are come to dedicate a memorial hall to that spirit of pure patriotism, which the soldiers of Knox County attested by their devotion in the late war. I am but echoing the thought of that simple but

matchless address at Gettysburg when I say that this dedication is not for them, but for us; not that they may be remembered, but that the recollection of them may vivify the civic consciences of those who come after them. These memorials are not addressed to our minds, but to our hearts.

Our plaudits cannot reach the dull, cold ear of death, nor add to the honors of the noble veterans who are still with us. But they can do much for us and for our country. They can be at once a pledge and an incentive to increased fidelity to political duty. When we can stand among the numberless graves of a Southern battle-field, or beside the monument to Abraham Lincoln at Springfield, or can trace the course of our Revolutionary fathers in their sturdy resistance at Bunker Hill or at Concord, when we can enter Fanueil Hall or the Old South Church in Boston, and feel no quickening of the pulse, no swelling of the heart with pride and love of country, be assured that we are neither good citizens nor good neighbors nor good men. We are but lovers of self, valueless to the State and valueless to ourselves.

When we view without protest or resistance, the corruption of legislatures and the malfeasance of executive and judicial officers, when we see accumulated wealth contemn legal restraints and become the basis of social distinction, and we complacently yield to its coarse arrogance, know that we are consenting to the death of the Republic,—that the Goths and the Huns are already at our gates.

Let us, then, dedicate this hall, and ourselves, to the spirit displayed by the men who saved this Nation from disunion. They saw the impending danger, and seeing, dared to do and die.

"Many in sad faith sought for her,
"Many with crossed hands sighed for her;
"But these, our brothers, fought for her
"At life's dear peril wrought for her,
"Tasting the raptured fleetness
"Of her divine completeness."

Let us show a like devotion in defending her against the less obvious, but not less perilous attacks in these dull times of peace. Let us apply to present conditions and to our conduct as citizens the test of civic honor. The black was

freed because slavery was unjust. The Nation was saved because it was brought back to those principles of justice which are the foundation of a republic. It can be preserved only by the devotion of a people who love justice and honor above power or wealth. That devotion must be unselfish. To be worthy of her glorious past it should spring, like the devotion of a mother, not from benefits received, but from sacrifices made and griefs borne. Let us pledge ourselves, as these soldiers did, to our Fatherland.

"What were our lives without thee?
"What all our lives to save thee?
"We reck not what we gave thee,
"We will not dare to doubt thee,
"But ask whatever else, and we will dare!"

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